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AUTHOR Beachy, Robert James
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ABSTRACT

Research investigating the development of sex-role identity in children from father-absent families was reviewed using Biller and Borstelmann's (1967) three-fold conceptualization of sex-role identity as sex-role orientation, sex-role preference, and sex-role adoption as an organizational framework. The review revealed that sex-role orientation has been measured predominantly by projective tests, with results consistently showing a negative correlation between father absence and masculine sex-role orientation in boys. There were not enough studies using projective measures of sex-role orientation to draw definite conclusions. Studies using self-report measures of sex-role preference yielded mixed results, suggesting that father absence does not affect sex-role preference as powerfully as it appears to affect sex-role orientation. Findings of studies of sex-role adoption, typically measured by behavior ratings, support the view that father absence is not related to sex-role adoption. This aspect of sex-role identity seems to be least closely affected by father absence. Variables that have been shown to mitigate the effect of father absence on children have been identified, including age of child at time of father absence, cause of father absence, presence of siblings or father substitutes, and maternal behavior. (Author/NB)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF SEX-ROLE IDENTITY IN CHILDREN FROM FATHER-ABSENT FAMILIES

BY

ROBERT JAMES BEACHY

APPROVED:

Robert E. Snyder
First Reader — Date 6/11/87

Second Reader — Date 6/11/87

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APPROVED:

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF SEX-ROLE IDENTITY IN CHILDREN FROM FATHER-ABSENT FAMILIES

A Doctoral Research Paper

Presented to

the Faculty of the Rosemead School of Psychology

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Psychology

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by

Robert James Beachy

May 1987

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
ABSTRACT	v
INTRODUCTION	1
THEORETICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE FATHER'S ROLE	2
METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES	4
MULTIDIMENSIONAL CONCEPTUALIZATION OF SEX ROLES	7
EFFECTS OF FATHER ABSENCE ON BOYS	9
Sex-typed Behaviors	9
Sex-Role Identity	13
EFFECTS OF FATHER ABSENCE ON GIRLS	21
VARIABLES THAT MODERATE THE EFFECT OF FATHER ABSENCE	25
Age of the Child at Time of Father Absence	25
Cause of Father Absence	27
Presence of Siblings	27
Father Substitutes	28
Maternal Behavior	29
SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS	31
RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS	34
REFERENCES	36

ABSTRACT

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SEX-ROLE IDENTITY IN CHILDREN FROM FATHER-ABSENT FAMILIES

Robert James Beachy

This paper reviews research that has investigated the development of sex-role identity in children from father-absent families. Piller and Borstelmann's (1967) three-fold conceptualization of sex-role identity as sex-role orientation, sex-role preference, and sex-role adoption is utilized as an organizational framework for studies of sex-role identity. The research indicates that father absence most strongly affects the underlying sex-role orientation of children while sex-role adoption is least affected as reflected in behavior. Mitigating variables of this effect are identified. These include age of the child at time of father absence, cause of father absence, presence of siblings or father substitutes, and maternal behavior.

The Development of Sex-Role Identity in Children from Father-Absent Families

The single parent family has become increasingly prevalent in the United States in recent years. Of all children in the United States, 20% (12,000,000) belong to single parent families (Bilge & Kaufman, 1983). The majority of these families are mother-headed, with no father present. From 1970 to 1979, the number of single parent families increased nearly fourfold: in 1970, the number of single parent families was 234,000 and in 1979, that number had risen to 902,000 (S. Rawlings, cited in Weinraub & Wolf, 1983). Glick (1979) has projected that 45% of the children born in 1977 will spend some time in a single parent family. This figure was expected to rise to at least 50% by 1990 (Glick, 1979), but the recent stabilizing of the divorce rate may reduce this projected increase.

Single parent families can be formed in several ways, but divorce is by far the most common cause of this type of family (Bilge & Kaufman, 1983). The rate of divorce in the United States more than doubled between 1965 and 1980 (Glick & Lin, 1986). Less frequent causes of single parent families include the death of a spouse or the birth of a child to a single parent. The rise in the divorce rate in this country has accounted for most of the increase in this type of family, although the number of children born to single parents is also increasing. As the number of single parent families has increased, so too has public interest and con-

cern for the children of these families. Much research has been generated that documents the effects of growing up with only one parent.

One of the primary areas of focus has been that of sex-role development in children from single parent families. Because of the much greater prevalence of mother-headed families, most investigations have been studies of "father-absent" families. This approach is significant in light of the importance attached to the father's impact on sex-role development on both sexes by most contemporary theorists (Biller & Weiss, 1970). Since the father's role is considered to be so significant, it is crucial to determine the effect of his absence on children's development. The single parent family offers a unique setting to assess the impact of father absence on sex-role development.

Theoretical Importance of the Father's Role

All major theories of identification emphasize the importance of the father as well as the mother in sex-role development. Biller and Borstelmann (1967) have provided a good summary of various theories from which much of the material in this section is taken.

Psychoanalytic theory considers masculine development to be dependent on the presence of the father in the family. It is postulated that the boy's fear of his father during the oedipal phase results in a subsequent identification with him

to resolve the oedipal conflict. Through this identification, masculinity develops in the boy (Biller & Borstelmann, 1967). For the daughter, the father is also important. The daughter's competition with her mother for her father's love is the principle component in her identification process with her mother (Hetherington, 1972).

Learning theory hypothesizes that masculine development is correlated with the degree of affect a father has for his son and the corresponding love the boy has for his father. The boy imitates his father and develops masculine behavior in order to gain greater reinforcement from the father (Biller & Borstelmann, 1967). The father is important to the development of sex roles in daughters as well. Social learning theorists believe that reinforcement from the father as well as learned experiences from interactions with him lead to acquistion of feminine behavior and particularly those skills involved in interacting with males (Hetherington, 1972).

A third theory, role theory, also ascribes significance to the father in sex-role development. This view postulates that "it is identification with the father, in the sense of internalizing a reciprocal role relationship with the father, which is crucial for producing appropriate sex-role orientations in both males and females" (Johnson, 1963, p. 319). The father is believed to differentiate his role for each sex. Boys identify with the father's instrumental role as it

relates to mastery of the environment. The father, however, responds differently to his daughter by rewarding her for being "attractive" and encouraging her expressive development (Johnson, 1963).

The significance of the father in sex-role development is evident from this brief summary of various theoretical viewpoints. Therefore, it is important to determine what, if any, empirical support exists for the proposition that the father's presence is crucial for sex-role development. Furthermore, the exceptionally high number of children living without a father provides an even more important reason to summarize the findings in this area. For this reason, this paper will review the empirical literature in the field, primarily from the past 20 years. An attempt will be made to summarize relevant findings and suggest directions for future research.

Methodological Issues

As previously stated, father-absent studies predominate this area of research. This approach usually involves comparing children from fatherless families with a group of control subjects from intact families on a number of dependent variables. There are several methodological and conceptual problems associated with this approach.

First, these studies have tended to view all single parent families as a homogeneous group (Cashion, 1982). The absence of the father in the family has been seen as the main simi-

larity. In most cases, studies have failed to distinguish among different types of single parent families, assuming that having one parent was the only critical characteristic of these families. Other variables such as socioeconomic status, environmental stress, the support available to the single parent, and the cause and length of father absence have typically been ignored (Levitin, 1979). This assumption of the single parent family as a unique structural type hindered the discovery of the diversity of single parent families as well as their commonality with two-parent families (Gongla, 1982). Recent researchers (e.g., Biller, 1968a, 1969; Hetherington, 1972; Santrock, 1977) have discriminated among different types of single parent families more adequately. There is less focus on proving the inadequacy of the single parent family form and a greater attempt to determine the effects of specific characteristics of them.

A related methodological issue is that correlational designs are utilized to assess the effects of father absence on sex-role development (Blechman, 1982). Causal relationships cannot be established within a correlational design. However, while no cause and effect statement can be made with absolute certainty, the assumed effect of father absence on children does represent one plausible explanation of significant differences between the two family types. Nonetheless, covariates of the independent variable are often neither ruled out nor controlled in many of these studies.

Matching has been used by some studies in an attempt to control for extraneous variables within a correlational design. While this procedure may be helpful, it also can create additional difficulties when groups being compared have been preselected. Studies that compare children from father-absent families with children from intact families encounter this difficulty. Because the groups are preselected (say, on family income), their scores on dependent measures may regress to different means (Kazdin, 1980). It is then difficult to separate the effect of father absence from statistical regression. Matching may also fail to control some important extraneous variables that go unrecognized by the researcher (Blechman, 1982).

Another potential methodological difficulty concerns the dependent measures used to assess sex-role development. In many studies, projective drawings or doll-play tests have been the primary measures of sex-role development. One problem with these measures is that interpretation of the results is theory related. In addition, these interpretations can vary greatly between researchers (Blechman, 1982). Self-reports and teacher ratings have also been popular measures of sex roles. These, too, are subject to bias and distortion. Blechman (1982) points out the need to develop valid dependent measures that adequately reflect a child's development and possess both concurrent and predictive validity.

A final methodological issue is the difficulty of conceptualizing sex roles. Initial research seemed to focus on a global concept of sex-role identification. This concept is difficult to operationalize because it is not directly observable and is ambiguous in nature (Biller & Borstelmann, 1967). In addition, the projective tests that have been used as major dependent measures add their own amount of subjectivity, increasing the potential bias in interpretation.

Multidimensional Conceptualization of Sex Roles

In an effort to define the general concept of sex roles more clearly, Biller and Borstelmann (1967) proposed a threefold conceptualization of sex-role preference, sex-role adoption, and sex-role orientation.

"Sex-role preference refers to an individual's relative desire to adhere to the cultural prescriptions and proscriptions of the masculine or feminine role" (Biller & Borstelmann, 1967, p. 260). It entails a desire for behavior associated with one sex and implies a conscious choice by the child. Sex-role preference is often measured by placing subjects in a situation where they must choose among a set of items or pictures rated on a masculinity-femininity scale.

Sex-role adoption refers to the demonstration of observable, sex-related behaviors (Ward, 1969). Biller and Borstelmann (1967) define it as "a complex pattern of publicly observable behavior, often taking place in the

framework of social interaction" (p. 260). Sex-role adoption is only partially within conscious awareness and relates essentially to how others view the behavior within a masculinity-femininity perspective. Measurement of sex-role adoption is more difficult. It is often accomplished via behavior ratings and observation; however, this approach has significant drawbacks. There is a certain level of subjectivity involved, and it is difficult to categorize specific behaviors as masculine or feminine (Biller & Borstelmann, 1967).

The concept of sex-role orientation is the most ambiguous of the three dimensions. According to Biller and Borstelmann (1967), sex-role orientation is

> an underlying, and not necessarily conscious, perception of the maleness or femaleness of the self. It refers to the product of an early learning process in the individual which is assumed to take place, for the most part, in the second and third years of life. (p. 260)

It is felt that significant others play a more crucial role in shaping a child's sex-role orientation than his sex-role preference or sex-role adoption. Measurement of sex-role orientation, since it is mainly unconscious, is often done with projective drawings or situations.

Unfortunately, there has been very little research to determine how these three aspects of sex-role are interrelated. Biller and Borstelmann (1967) note that low, positive correlations between sex-role preference and sex-role adoption and between sex-role preference and sex-role

orientation have been found. Because of these small correlations, they believe that sex-role is a multi-dimensional concept. This conceptualization may help explain some of the conflicting findings in the literature and will be examined later in the paper when the effects of father absence are summarized.

Effects of Father Absence on Boys

While a few studies have investigated the effects of father absence on girls, the majority have detailed its impact on boys in single parent families. The relevant dependent variables in these studies can be separated into two categories: sex-typed behaviors or sex-role identity.

Sex-typed Behaviors

Aggression. Several studies have evaluated the influence of paternal absence on aggression, considered to be a masculine behavior. Aggression is typically defined as threatening or attacking behavior exhibited by the subject in person or in doll-play activities. As such, it is generally considered a negative, albeit masculine, trait. Hetherington (1966) studied three groups: father-present, early father-absent, and late father-absent boys. Consistent with predictions based on identification theory, she found that early father-absent boys were less aggressive than late father-absent or father-present boys. There was no significant difference between the late father-absent and father-

present boys on measures of aggression. Santrock (1970) found similar results in his study comparing preschool father-absent and father-present boys. Utilizing structured doll-play and maternal interviews, he found that father-absent boys were significantly less aggressive on the maternal interview measure. No significant difference was found on the doll-play interview, leading Santrock to conclude that the maternal interview was a more discriminative instrument than the doll-play interview.

A study by McCord, McCord, and Thurber (1962) yielded results which were inconsistent with predictions of identification theory. However, the subjects in their study were older than those in studies finding a negative correlation between aggression and father absence. In their study, they analyzed observer ratings of father-absent and father-present boys and found that father absence was positively correlated with aggression. Specifically, for boys whose fathers left between the ages of 6 and 12, aggression was related to paternal absence. Santrock (1977) found results similar to those obtained by McCord et al. (1962). Using teacher ratings and doll-play interviews, he discovered father-absent boys were more aggressive than boys from father-present homes. In addition, the later father absence occurred in the boy's life, the more aggressive he was during the doll play interview. Boys whose fathers left when the boys were between 6 and 9 years of age were more aggressive than boys

who were from 0 to 2 and 3 to 6 years of age when their fathers left.

At first glance, the data from these studies appear to contradict theories which posit an identification process as crucial to sex-role development. But when age of subjects is considered, the results are more consistent. For the most part, father absence affects young boys by decreasing aggressiveness, while father absence affects older boys by increasing aggressiveness. McCord et al. (1962) postulate that father-absent boys are exhibiting "compensatory masculinity" when they are more aggressive. Compensatory masculinity occurs when boys behave in an exaggeratedly aggressive fashion, while simultaneously exhibiting relatively dependent, feminine behavior. Such children are believed to be responding to confusion in sex-role identity which occurs when they become aware of the higher value placed on the male role by society which conflicts with their predominantly feminine orientation (Biller & Borstelmann, 1967).

In a related study, father-absent boys with older male siblings were more aggressive than father-absent boys with no older brother (Wohlford, Santrock, Berger, & Liberman, 1971). The presence of a brother, therefore, seemed to offset the loss of the father and made the child more like a child from a father-present home, at least on the measure of aggression.

In some ways, aggressive qualities in boys are assumed

to be desirable because they reflect the "masculinity" of the individual. It seems questionable though whether aggressive boys, at least as "aggressive" has been defined in these studies, is something to value. Aggression as threatening or attacking behavior is certainly not beneficial to society or the individual. So while early father absence seems to inhibit aggression, which is one aspect of masculine behavior, it is helpful to remember that this effect may not be entirely negative.

Dependency. Dependency has also been investigated to determine its relationship to father absence. Dependency, like aggression, has been viewed as socially undesirable by traditional research, but it may not always be a negative characteristic. While this research has seen dependency as negative, some question is raised as to whether this is actually the case.

Typically, dependency has been assessed with behavior rating scales. Most theorists predict that father absence produces children who are more dependent than father-present children because of a greater identification with their mother. This hypothesis has been supported by several studies.

In 4- and 5-year-old boys, Santrock (1970) found a higher level of dependent behavior on adults in father-absent families, according to maternal ratings of behavior. Using father-absent and father-present boys from 9 to 12 years of

age as subjects, Hetherington (1966) found no significant difference in dependency on adults, according to teacher ratings. However, father-absent boys were significantly more dependent on peers than were father-present boys. Finally, dependency on adults in father-absent boys was found to be significantly reduced if an older male sibling was present in the family (Wohlford et al., 1971).

Contradictory findings were presented by Santrock (1977) in his study of pre-adolescent boys. On one aspect of independence--"trying things out on their own"--father-absent boys were rated higher than father-present boys. However, there was no significant difference on two other areas of independence: "working alone" and "developing own interests." McCord et al. (1962) also found that dependency did not differentiate between father-absent and father-present boys. While some studies have supported the hypothesis that father absence increases dependency, other contradictory evidence has been found.

Sex-Role Identity

The studies summarized in this section have attempted to investigate the global concept of sex-role identity. A significant difficulty in this area is that while all of the studies have examined sex-role identity, this concept has not been defined consistently. In fact, the studies reviewed here have focused on different aspects of sex-role characteristics while referring to it with the same term. As a

result of this confusion and lack of agreement in use of terms, it is quite difficult to summarize the literature in this area.

This review of the research found a nearly equal number of studies with significant and non-significant results. However, a pattern emerges when the results are organized according to the type of measure used in the study, although some variability within groups still exists. These three types of measures, projective measures, self-report measures, and behavior rating scales, parallel Biller's breakdown of sex role into sex-role orientation, preference, and adoption (Biller & Borstelmann, 1967).

Sex-role orientation. Sex-role orientation is the underlying perception of one's sex-role identity. It will be assumed in this paper that sex-role orientation is being measured when projective measures are used. Drawings, fantasy play, and TAT-like responses to pictures depicting male and/or female figures have been used in past studies to assess sex-role orientation. Most projective studies have demonstrated the negative impact of father absence on masculinity in boys (Badaines, 1976; Barclay & Cusamano, 1967; Biller, 1968a, 1968b, 1969; Burton, 1972; D'Andrade, 1973; Drake & McDougall, 1977; Hetherington, 1966; LeCorgne & Laosa, 1976).

The most popular measure of sex-role development in children has been Brown's IT Scale (Biller & Borstelmann,

1967). This scale is a projective test designed to get at less obvious aspects of sex-role development. The subject is presented with a picture of an ambiguous child figure identified as "IT," and is asked to choose what "IT" would like in a series of picture cards, objects, and figures identified with sex-typed roles. It is believed that the child projects his or her own sex-role identity onto the "IT" figure. Although this measure has received some criticism, Biller and Borstelmann (1967) report that adequate construct validity has been demonstrated.

Biller has done a number of similar studies predominantly utilizing the "IT" test to measure sex-role orientation (Biller 1968a, 1968b, 1969). Every one of his studies has demonstrated a positive correlation between father presence and masculinity in boys. He also found that sex-role orientation was inhibited to a greater extent than was sex-role preference or sex-role adoption.

In addition to examining the effect of father absence on aggression, Hetherington's study (1966) also investigated underlying sex-role development using the "IT" test. She compared two groups of father-absent boys, early father absence and late father absence, to a group of father-present subjects. Her results indicated that late father-absent boys were similar in their level of masculine development to father-present boys. However, early father-absent subjects had significantly lower masculine scores on the "IT" scale

than father-present boys. Similar results were obtained using the "IT" scale in a study by Badaines (1976).

Studies that have utilized figure drawings have also consistently found a significant relationship between father absence and masculine development. Burton (1972) used the Draw-A-Person Test in an attempt to assess the "hidden" sex-role orientation of young children. It was assumed that the sex of the first drawing reflected the sex-role identity of subjects. This tendency was demonstrated previously by Biller (1968a) and was replicated by Burton. Burton (1972) found that father-present boys were more likely to draw males first than father-absent boys. Drake and McDougall (1977) attempted to measure sex-role orientation in second-grade boys using drawing tests and found the usual significant difference relative to father status. Other studies using drawings found that father absence was related to lower masculinity (Burton, 1972; D'Andrade, 1973; Drake & McDougall, 1977; Lecorgne & Laosa, 1976).

One other projective measure used in Greenstein's study (1966) failed to demonstrate a significant effect of father status on masculinity. Using a TAT hero choice measure in which the sex of the subject of the story told by an individual was assumed to be related to sex-role orientation, Greenstein (1966) did not find any differences between the two groups of subjects. However, Biller (1970) has pointed out a major flaw in this study. The criterion for father

absence was that no adult male had been living in the home for at least three years prior to age 12. According to Biller (1970), at the time of the study 10 of the 25 father-absent adolescents were living in a family where an adult male was present. The presence of the adult male may have mitigated the effects of father absence on these subjects.

The results of studies employing projective measures in comparing father-absent to father-present boys are quite consistent. Out of 11 measures, only 1 failed to demonstrate a significant effect of father status on masculinity. As was previously stated, one possible explanation for this non-significant result was the inadequate selection of subjects in the study. In general, projective measures reflect a negative relationship between father absence and masculinity. The aspect of an individual's sex role which is tapped by projective tests is the underlying sex-role orientation. Considerable support has been generated for the hypothesis that sex-role orientation in children is significantly influenced by whether or not a father is present in the home.

Sex-role preference. Sex-role preference, another aspect of sex-role identity, refers to an individual's desire to follow a masculine or feminine role, and it is assessed by self-report measures. This type of measure includes adjective checklists, picture choice measures, game, toy, or role preference tasks, masculinity-femininity scales, and semantic differential scales. In all cases, a masculine

response is defined by the typical response of boys and a feminine response by the typical response of girls. The semantic differential scale accomplishes this with a series of opposed adjectives describing some attitude object. In most cases, selections of father-absent children are compared to selections of father-present children to see if there is any difference from the way a typical child would respond. The results of studies utilizing these measures are fairly well mixed between those showing a significantly negative effect of father absence (Biller, 1968a, 1969; Biller & Bahm, 1971; D'Andrade,1973; Santrock, 1970), and those yielding no significant difference (Barclay & Cusamano, 1967; Biller, 1968b; Drake & McDougall, 1977; Greenstein, 1966; Longabaugh, 1973; Santrock, 1977; Vess, Schwebel, & Moreland, 1983).

Biller (1968a), for example, studied sex-role preference in a sample of 5-year-old boys. Utilizing measures of game and toy preference, he found that father-absent boys achieved significantly lower masculinity scores than father-present boys. Biller and Bahm (1971) found that early father-absent boys had lower masculinity than father-present boys as measured by an adjective checklist. D'Andrade (1973) found similar results in an investigation of sex-role preference using a role-preference task in which subjects were requested to state their preference for different sex-typed roles.

In contrast, many studies did not yield significant results. For example, Drake and McDougall (1977) used the

Drake Preference Test of sex roles on a sample of second-grade boys and found that father absence did not produce differential results. Sex-role preference studies that employed femininity scales (Vess et al., 1983), toy preference tasks (Biller, 1968b), picture choices measures (Greenstein, 1966; Santrock, 1977), and semantic differential scales (Barclay & Cusamano, 1967; Longabaugh, 1973) did not yield any significant differences for father-absent subjects. On the other hand, different studies using the same type of measures, such as adjective checklists (Biller & Bahm, 1971), toy and game preference tasks (Biller, 1968a; 1969), role preference tasks (D'Andrade, 1973), and picture choices (Santrock, 1970) did yield significant results. There does not appear to be any pattern in the research that can account for the variability of results concerning sex-role preference.

Sex-role adoption. Sex-role adoption refers to the demonstration of sex-related behaviors (Ward, 1969) and is measured usually with behavior rating scales completed by a teacher or a parent. Out of a total of six measures of sex-role adoption in the studies reviewed, one found a positive relationship between father presence and masculinity, one found a negative relationship, and four found no significant differences.

In three separate studies, Biller (1968a, 1968b, 1969) utilized teacher ratings of behavior to measure sex-role

adoption. Biller's scale included a wide range of behaviors thought to contribute to masculinity, such as relative assertiveness, competitiveness, aggressiveness, and independence. Passivity, dependency, and timidity were assumed to indicate low masculinity. In all three cases no difference was found between father-absent and father-present boys. This finding was replicated in a study by Drake and McDougall (1977), which also used teacher ratings.

One study of preschool-age boys found that father-absent subjects were more feminine than father-present subjects (Santrock, 1970). In this case maternal ratings of behavior were used. A second study by Santrock (1977) using teacher ratings yielded just the opposite results. He found that father-absent boys were more masculine than father-present boys. In this study, however, the subjects were 10- to 11-year-old boys. Given Hetherington's (1966) age differentiated results, this factor may very well account for the reversed findings.

It is evident from these studies that the results are most consistent on projective measures of sex-role identity in that nearly every study yielded significant results in the same direction. This uniformity of findings provides strong support for the hypothesis that father absence interferes with the development of an underlying sex-role orientation in boys. Sex-role orientation, as measured by projective tests, is apparently influenced by father absence. The findings of

studies utilizing self-report measures, when significant, are consistently in the same direction; however, a large body of non-significant results also exists, thereby qualifying the conclusion that father absence decreases the masculinity of sex-role preference in boys. The results of rating scales of behavior, which are believed to reflect sex-role adoption, are generally non-significant. The findings seem to support the view that father-absence does not affect sex-role adoption, although it may also be that measures of sex-role adoption are not sensitive enough to reflect differences between groups of subjects.

Effects of Father Absence on Girls

While many studies have focused on the effects of father absence on boys, relatively few have considered the impact on girls. This dearth of research may be related to several factors. First, early research found no relationship between father absence and sex-role development in girls and so fewer studies may have been generated. On a more conceptual level, there is greater reason to postulate effects of father absence on boys because they are without a male role model. Girls, on the other hand, typically have a female model in their mother and so fewer effects would be expected. Those studies that have used girls as subjects have generally found no significant difference on traditional sex-role measures (e.g., femininity scales, picture preference tasks,

and drawings) between father-present and father-absent girls (Hainline & Feig, 1978; Hetherington, 1972; Santrock, 1970; Stephens & Day, 1979; Vess et al., 1983). However, few studies utilized projective measures, which are most likely to detect a difference. Hetherington (1972), using a sample of adolescent girls, was the only researcher to employ a projective measure, the Draw-A-Person Test, and she did not find significant results.

In the same study in which he found a significant effect for father absence on preschool boys, Santrock (1970) found no significant differences between preschool father-absent and father-present girls on a picture preference test. Stephens and Day (1979) utilized the Bem Sex Role Inventory on a sample of adolescent daughters from intact and father-absent families and found no differences in relation to father status. Hainline and Feig (1978) used several self-report scales and did not find any significant differences in sex role. In an attempt to determine long-term effects of parental divorce on children, Vess et al. (1983) measured sex-role development in college students using the Personal Attributes Questionniare and the Gough Femininity Scale, two self-report measures. They, too, found no significant differences among subjects from intact versus divorced families.

The lack of effect of father absence on traditional measures of sex-role development in females has been consis-

tently demonstrated. It is unclear, though, whether these findings are due to a lack of effect of father absence or a bias in the research in which a low proportion of projective measures of sex-role orientation have been used. There is some evidence that lack of a father interferes with a girl's subsequent relationships with males. These relational skills are often seen as one aspect of the feminine sex role. In a review of the literature, Biller (1981a) suggested that "father absence seems to have more effect on the girl's ability to function in interpersonal and heterosexual relationships than it does on her sex-role preference" (p. 503).

This claim is supported by evidence from Hetherington's well-designed study (1972) of adolescent girls. Through behavioral observation and interviews, she found that father-absent females had significant disruptions in their interactions with males. This finding was true for daughters from divorced and widowed homes although the type of difficulty was different for the two groups. In the case of daughters from divorced homes, the girls tended to be forward and aggressive with males, seeking attention and greater physical contact. On the other hand, daughters from widowed families tended to be shy and timid, and preferred contact with females. Girls from divorced homes reported more sexual activity than girls from intact families; girls from widowed families reported less.

Nelson and Vangen's study (cited in Biller, 1981a) found

that father-absent girls were more precocious in their dating behavior and more knowledgeable about sex than father-present girls. Hainline and Feig (1978) failed to replicate Hetherington's findings that father-absent girls experienced disruptions in interpersonal relationships with males. However, their subjects differed from Hetherington's on several characteristics, with the most important being subject age. They focused on college students while Hetherington looked at adolescents. Another potential explanation for the different results is that sexually precocious girls may be more likely to get married or pregnant early, thereby decreasing the likelihood of going to college. As a result, a sample of college students may have relatively fewer sexually precocious subjects.

It does appear, then, that father absence has a less significant effect on girls than boys, at least in terms of the way in which sex roles are traditionally measured. However, the research has indicated a potential impact of father absence on a girl's relationships with men and boys, at least during early adolescence. It is significant to note that although relational skills are supposed to be an important aspect of the feminine sex role, the measures of sex-role development do not pick up this factor. Further research is needed to clarify this apparent relationship between father absence and cross-sex relationships.

Variables That Moderate the Effect of Father Absence

As has been previously mentioned, a variety of factors is believed to moderate the effect of father absence on children. This section will address several of these variables and attempt to clarify their role in the relationship between father absence and sex-role development.

Age of the Child at Time of Father Absence

Most researchers agree that the younger children are at the time father absence occurs, the greater the consequences for their sex-role development. This belief has been supported by a number of studies (Biller & Bahm, 1971; Hetherington 1966, 1972; Santrock, 1977). Biller and Bahm (1971) found that boys who became father-absent before age 5 were less masculine than boys who became father-absent after this age. Similarly, Hetherington (1966) found that father absence after the age of 5 produces minimal effect on pre-adolescent males. However if the father absence occurred prior to this age, considerable disruption in specific sex-typed traits was found. This finding was replicated on a sample of adolescent girls with observational measures of sex-typed behavior, though not on measures of sex-role identity (Hetherington, 1972).

Santrock's study (1977) yielded somewhat mixed results. Earlier father-absent boys were less aggressive than late father-absent boys, which is consistent with the above

findings. However, earlier father-absent boys were also more disobedient which suggests an inconsistency. It may be that disobedience, if passive, could be viewed as more feminine, which would be consistent with other findings. Santrock (1977) suggested that later father absence may have a greater effect on socially accepted forms of aggression while earlier father absence may lead to more antisocial behavior such as disobedience, although there is no empirical evidence to support this view. One study by Drake and McDougall (1977) found that the timing of father absence had no effect on sex-role development.

Because of the importance of timing of father absence, various critical periods have been suggested. Burton (1972) pointed to the first two years of infancy as being the critical period in the development of sex roles. Presence of the father during a boy's first two years was related to sex of first drawing, size of male drawings, and differential size of drawings, each of which is thought to reflect masculine identification. Based on evidence from his studies, Biller (1981) proposed that father absence before age 4 or 5 was most critical for masculine development. Although Ward's study (1969) did not deal with father-absent subjects, it is relevant to this discussion. He investigated the process of sex-role development in children from intact families and found that sex-role preferences were established by age 5. He also found that sex-role identification occurs earlier in

girls than boys although he did not specify how much earlier.

Cause of Father Absence

A second important variable related to the impact of father absence on sex-role development is the cause of the father absence. Santrock (1977) investigated the relationship of the reason for father absence, death or divorce, to several different measures of masculinity. He found only one significant difference: boys from divorced homes were more aggressive on the structured doll-play interview than boys from widowed homes.

Hetherington (1972) studied adolescent girls and found important differences in the way father absence impacted adolescent girls from divorced and widowed homes. Daughters of widows tended to be inhibited, shy, and avoid contact with males. In contrast, daughters from divorced homes exhibited attention-seeking behavior, early heterosexual behavior, and desire for closeness and contact with males. Both studies that looked at this variable, then, demonstrated some differences correlated with the cause of father absence.

Presence of Siblings

The presence of siblings has been shown to have a mitigating effect on the influence of father absence on some aspects of sex-role development (Santrock, 1970; Vess et al., 1983; Wohlford et al., 1971). Vess et al. (1983) found that males from divorced families with older brothers scored significantly higher on a masculinity scale than males

without older brothers. Females with older brothers tended to score lower on the masculinity scale than those without older brothers. On a maternal interview measure of aggression, Wohlford et al. (1971) showed that boys with older brothers scored more aggressively than children with no older male siblings. In addition, these same subjects were less dependent according to the maternal interview and doll-play interview dependency measures. However, it is important to note that the presence of the older male sibling did not affect the masculinity-femininity variables.

Santrock (1970) found that both father-absent boys and girls with older brothers only were more masculine than father-absent boys or girls with older sisters only. He also found that father-absent girls with older sisters were more dependent than father-absent girls with older brothers. Two studies did not find a significant difference in subjects with versus without an older sibling (D'Andrade, 1973; Drake & McDougall, 1977). It appears that the presence of an older sibling who can serve as a model for masculine behavior will increase the likelihood of appropriate sex-role behavior in father-absent boys.

Father Substitutes

Although the presence of other male models is believed to have a positive effect on father-absent boys, relatively few studies have investigated this variable. Drake and McDougall (1977) found that father substitutes did not signi-

ficantly affect measures of sex-role orientation, preference, or adoption in second-grade boys. In contrast, Santrock's study (1970) of preschool father-absent boys found that those subjects with a father substitute were significantly less dependent than those boys with no father substitute. Although beyond the scope of this paper, Biller (1981a) has cited evidence suggesting the presence of a step-father can have a facilitating effect on the personality development of father-absent children. Greater attention to this area of research is important in determining mitigating factors of the effect of father absence on children.

Maternal Behavior

Finally, maternal behavior in father-absent families has been shown to affect sex-role development in sons. McCord et al. (1962) found that the presence of a rejecting mother was related to sex-role instability in boys. Father-absent boys with apparently well-adjusted mothers exhibited greater sex-role stability. Longabaugh (1973) found that father absence was associated with alterations in mothers' behavior toward sons, but not toward daughters. Increased mother-son interaction was positively correlated with femininity of semantic style in male children.

Several of Biller's studies have looked at the impact of maternal encouragement of masculine behavior on sex-role development in father-absent children (Biller, 1968a, 1969; Biller & Bahm, 1971). In his first study he found that

maternal encouragement of masculine behavior was positively related to levels of sex-role preference but not to sex-role adoption or orientation (Biller, 1968a). In another study (Biller, 1969), maternal encouragement was significantly related to boys' masculinity as measured by teacher ratings and a preference task. However, maternal behavior was not related to "IT" scores. These results seem to indicate that sex-role preference and sex-role adoption, but not sex-role orientation, were increased by maternal encouragement of masculine behavior in father-absent boys. Biller and Bahm (1971) discovered that maternal encouragement of masculine behavior was important for early father-absent boys, but did not affect late father-absent boys.

Biller (1969) has concluded that while the father-son relationship is critical for sex-role development in father-present boys, the mother-son relationship assumes primary significance in sex-role development of father-absent boys. The mother of the father-absent boy can apparently increase sex-role preference and sex-role adoption by encouraging masculine behavior. However, it also appears that this encouragement does not affect sex-role orientation, which is probably developed earlier and is more resistant to change (Biller, 1969).

It is evident that many factors can influence the way in which father absence affects sex-role development. Age of the child is critical in that the younger the child, the

greater the effect of father absence on sex-role development. Most researchers suggest that the first five years are the critical period of development. Cause of the father absence also seems to have some bearing on sex-role development, especially on girls. However, more research needs to be done to clarify the relationship of this factor to sex-role development in father-absent children. Both siblings and father substitutes can mitigate the effect of father absence on sex-role development. In general, the sex-role identity of children with older siblings or father substitutes is less affected by father absence. Finally, masculine behavior of boys has been shown to be related to maternal encouragement of this behavior in father-absent families.

Summary and Implications

The research reviewed in this paper has dealt specifically with the effects of father absence on sex-role development in children. An attempt has been made to outline the implications of father absence for the different aspects of sex role as developed by Biller and Borstelmann (1967).

Sex-role orientation, the underlying perception of the masculinity or femininity of oneself, has been measured predominantly by projective tests. These measures were assumed to tap the unconscious aspect of sex-role identity developed early in life. The results consistently showed a negative correlation between father absence and masculine sex-role orientation in boys. There were not enough studies

of girls using projective measures of sex-role orientation to draw definitive conclusions.

Sex-role preference involves an individual's conscious choice and preference for either a masculine or feminine role. Self-report measures that seem to be related to sex-role preference yielded mixed findings. While a number of studies found a significant relationship between father absence and lower masculinity for boys, many studies were not able to replicate this finding. The results of studies of the effects of father absence on girls using self-report measures showed no significant relationship. It may be postulated that father absence does not affect sex-role preference as powerfully as it appears to affect sex-role orientation. However, it is also possible that the self-report measures simply are not precise enough instruments to identify a relationship.

Sex-role adoption refers to the degree of masculinity or femininity exhibited in behavior. This aspect of sex-role identity is typically measured by behavior ratings. In studies of father-absent boys, findings support the view that father absence is not related to sex-role adoption. This facet of sex-role identity seems to be least closely affected by father absence.

This paper also identified major variables that have been shown to mitigate the effect of father absence on children. These include the age of the child at time of

father absence, the cause of father absence, the presence of siblings or father substitutes, and maternal encouragement of masculine behavior. All of these factors influence the relationship of father absence and sex-role development.

Despite the significant findings and interest of researchers in this area, the study of sex-role development is a controversial one. As Biller (1981b) recognizes, more researchers are advocating an abandonment of the traditional conceptualization of sex roles. This perspective seems to be a reaction against very restrictive and limited definitions of sex-role behavior and identity. The concept of androgyny, which deemphasizes sex-role differences, has become prominent in current literature. There are questions concerning the desirability of distinguishing sex roles. While traditional approaches and strictly limited definitions of sex role are problematic, much can be gained by continuing to investigate the father's influence on sex-role development. These factors can be helpful in learning socially desirable as well as undesirable sex-role patterns (Biller, 1981b).

It is important to recognize the importance of the mother-child relationship in father-absent families. While the loss of a father can be potentially devastating to a child, much of the effect of father absence may depend on such factors as the mother's response to the father's absence, her attitude toward the father, and her efforts to help her child cope with the loss of his father. Attempting

to provide father substitutes as well as seeking to arrange for her child a continuing relationship with his or her father could substantially reduce the effects of the father loss. While the mother cannot be a masculine model for her son, she can encourage and reward masculine behavior, thereby possibly increasing the masculinity of a child's sex-role adoption. This reinforcement will likely influence the development of a more masculine sex-role identity (Biller, 1981a).

Research Implications

While much research has already been done, more studies are needed in a number of areas. Further research in the area of sex-role development should attempt to clarify and distinguish the three aspects of sex role from each other. The development and validation of instruments that can adequately assess these facets of sex role is also important. Research should continue to control for important variables and seek to identify new factors that influence the relationship between father absence and sex-role development in children. More research on the efficacy of father substitutes and the potential beneficial impact of a stepfather is needed.

The effect of father absence on girls is one area that must be developed further. Studies utilizing a variety of measures are needed, especially projective measures to assess the impact on sex-role orientation. In relation to the

disruption in heterosexual relationships for females, research should seek to further clarify the relationship of father absence to this disruption. Is the disruption in relationships temporary and limited to adolescence? Can sex-role measures be developed that pick up these problems in relationships? Are there similar difficulties for boys? These questions remain largely unanswered.

Very few studies have examined the long-term effects of father absence on sex-role development. Biller (1981a) recommends more longitudinal studies which would assist in delineating long-term effects.

Finally, although some studies have been done, more research is needed which examines the continuing influence of the father on the family system, despite his physical absence. What kind of contact is the "absent" father seeking and maintaining with his child? How aware is the child of his father's continuing interest in him? It may be helpful to compare different types of custody arrangements (Biller, 1981b) or to compare father absent boys with boys who have ineffectual, distant fathers (Biller, 1970).

The importance of the father in sex-role development has been supported both theoretically and empirically. The development of sex-role identity in children from single parent families is a crucial issue, deserving of continued research interest and attention.

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